

## STOCKTON RECORD

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### **Common ground**

#### **Sometimes it only takes a game to make all the difference between a mother and a son**

VALLEY SPRINGS - Michael Wood has his game face on.

The lanky, blond 11-year-old sits at his family's computer, transfixed by the multicolored balls shooting across the screen as he plays the video game "Zuma." His typically-bright smile has been replaced by a look of concentration and determination.

That intense focus caught the attention of Michael's mother, Elaine Wood, 48. Michael has Asperger's Syndrome, a neurobiological disorder that makes social interaction difficult, and Elaine Wood wondered if she could reach out to her son and encourage him to communicate if they shared a common interest in video games.

The two now play together for about 30 minutes each day, and Michael talks with his mother about their gaming skills.

"It's given us a social connection," Elaine Wood said.

It has also given her a chance at winning \$1 million. That is the grand prize in the WorldWide Web Games, a video game competition set for Saturday in Hollywood.

The event will be taped for a December broadcast on the cable channel GSN.

Elaine Wood is one of about 70 game players from across the country who has qualified for the competition. If she wins, she will spend prize money on computer software for children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome, she said. The software would be given to area schools.

Asperger's Syndrome is considered a mild autism spectrum disorder, and it shares traits with autism. Symptoms include failure to develop friendships, inability to reciprocate social or emotional interaction, and impaired nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye contact and facial and hand gestures.

"They just don't have a lot of strategies for interacting," said Sonna McKee, speech therapist for the Calaveras Unified School District. Michael is a sixth-grader at Valley Springs Elementary School in the district.

The cause of Asperger's Syndrome is not known, and there is no cure.

While McKee would not discuss specifics about Michael, she said treatment for Asperger's focuses on teaching those with the disorder how to interact socially.

"You might teach about emotions, you might teach about impression making. You might teach body language," she said.

Author Sean Barron said he worked to overcome his autism spectrum disorder through hard work and by observing the social behaviors of those around him. Barron, 44, was diagnosed as autistic in the 1960s; he and his mother, Judy Barron, wrote "There's a Boy in Here," a book about their experiences with autism.

"It was like being a prisoner of my own mind," he said. "As a teenager I knew something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what it was and what to do about it."

He now works as a newspaper reporter in northeast Ohio and considers himself free of autism. Barron emphasized that people with autism spectrum disorders have a variety of gifts, and some use their talents working as scientists and engineers.

Michael Wood is a good student who is quiet and attentive, and he has an infectious smile for visitors. He often giggles and looks to his mother for help when asked a question.

Elaine Wood had assumed he was simply shy. But when Michael was in third grade, the family's dentist suggested he might have Asperger's Syndrome and urged Elaine Wood to get him checked out.

"I had never heard of it," she said. When Michael was diagnosed, "I was devastated," she said.

Elaine Wood was told Asperger's was a lifelong disorder, and she was not sure how it would affect Michael. She and her husband, John, also have a daughter Heather, 13, and a son Dylan, 4, who do not have the disorder.

Since Michael's diagnosis, Elaine Wood has worked to learn more about Asperger's Syndrome, and she's received help from McKee and behavioral therapists.

Learning how to play video games also has required some determination and hard work.

"I was a terrible player (in the beginning). He told me so," she said.

The two often play "Zuma," a game in which the goal is to match colored balls in a rapidly-growing chain. When the balls match, they disappear and the chain shrinks; a player moves onto the next level when all the balls disappear.

They lose if the chain grows to a certain point on the screen.

"Zuma" is a "skill game" in same category as solitaire, said Rick Weil, president of the Toronto-based FUN Technologies. The company runs the gaming Web site SkillJam.com and is hosting the WorldWide Web Games to promote the site and skill games.

Elaine Wood said she entered an online WorldWide Web Games qualifier to test her skills.

"I was shocked when I got a letter saying I was eligible for this tournament," she said. "I think it's going to be a blast."

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